

Complementary therapies

This sheet has been written to provide general information about complementary therapies for people with arthritis. It provides a summary of the current evidence about complementary therapies for arthritis as well as tips for the safe use of these therapies. Sources of further information are also included.

What are complementary therapies?

'Complementary therapies' are any treatments or therapies that are not part of the conventional treatment (such as medicines or surgery) of a disease. Examples of complementary therapies include acupuncture, massage, aromatherapy, vitamin and mineral supplements and herbal medicines.

Do complementary therapies work?

The main criticism of complementary therapies is that there

is often little scientific proof that they work. In many cases, little or no research has been done. In other cases, only poor quality studies have been done so the results may be inaccurate or exaggerated. Before trying a complementary therapy, make sure you understand whether the benefits have been clearly proven so that you are not misled or given false hope. The current reliable evidence from studies of complementary therapies for arthritis is summarised below.

	Osteoarthritis (OA)	Rheumatoid arthritis
Strong evidence		Fish oil
Moderate evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acupuncture (knee OA) • Capsaicin gel (applied onto the skin) • Indian frankincense • Methylsulphonylmethane (MSM) • Phytodolor • Rosehip • S-adenosyl methionine (SAMe) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gamma linoleic acid (found in borage/starflower seed oil, evening primrose oil and blackcurrant seed oil) • Thunder god vine (<i>Tripterygium wilfordii</i>)* (*Important side effects have been reported with the use of this treatment. Seek professional advice before using this treatment.)
Limited evidence[#]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acupuncture for hip OA • Avocado-soybean unsaponifiables (ASU) • Chondroitin • Devil's claw (<i>Harpagophytum procumbens</i>) • Ginger • Glucosamine sulfate • Green-lipped mussel • Krill oil • Pine bark extracts • SKI 306X • Willow bark extract 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acupuncture • Krill oil • Phytodolor

[#]Research is promising but is either limited to a single or few trials, or shows conflicted results for these treatments and further research is necessary. (Note, there are many other treatments available however these have been tested in single trials only, or have not been demonstrated to be safe and/or effective. There is also no reliable proof that complementary therapies are effective for any other types of arthritis.)

For your local Arthritis Office:
1800 011 041 www.arthritisaustralia.com.au

Are complementary therapies safe?

Because many complementary therapies have not been thoroughly tested, it is not known if they are safe or unsafe.

Complementary medicines need to be treated with the same care and respect as other medicines. Many complementary medicines can cause side effects and may interact with other medicines (eg. prescription medicines). This can cause serious health problems or make other medicines less effective. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist before using any complementary therapy.

Before you start using a complementary therapy

Here are a few steps to protect yourself:

- Get an accurate diagnosis from your doctor.
- Get information about the treatment. Talk to your doctor about the treatment. Find out if the treatment is likely to interact with your current treatments. Do not stop any current treatments without first discussing it with your doctor. You could also talk to your pharmacist or local Arthritis Office about the treatment. Keep in mind that the information given to you by the person promoting the product or therapy may not be reliable, or they may have a financial incentive to recommend a specific treatment.
- Make sure the treatment or therapy is something you can afford, particularly if you need to keep using it.
- Check qualifications of practitioners involved. The websites of some professional associations are listed below for more information or to help you find an accredited practitioner.

Warning signs

Be on the look out for the following warning signs when considering a new treatment:

- A cure is offered. There is currently no cure for most forms of arthritis so be wary of products or treatments that promise a cure.
- Proof for the treatment relies only on testimonials (personal stories). This may be a sign that the treatment has not been scientifically tested.
- You are told to give up your current effective treatments or discouraged from getting treatment from your doctor.
- The treatment is expensive and not covered by any health fund.

Working with your healthcare team

You may feel concerned that your doctor or other members of your healthcare team will disapprove of complementary therapies. However it is very important to keep your healthcare team informed, even if they do not approve. Your healthcare team, particularly your doctor and pharmacist, can't give you the best professional advice without knowing all the treatments you are using. This includes vitamin supplements, herbal medicines and other therapies.

CONTACT YOUR LOCAL ARTHRITIS OFFICE FOR MORE INFORMATION SHEETS ON ARTHRITIS.

All treatments, even 'natural' ones, can have side effects.

Always keep your healthcare team informed of any treatments you are taking.

For more information:

Books: Braun, Lesley 2009, *Herbs and natural supplements: An evidence based guide*, Churchill Livingstone, Sydney.

Brewer, Sarah 2009, *Overcoming arthritis: The complete complementary health program*, Duncan Baird Publishers, London.

Foltz-Gray, Dorothy 2005, *Alternative treatments for arthritis: An A-Z guide The ultimate guide to herbs, supplements, bodywork and other complementary treatments for arthritis*, Arthritis Foundation of America, Atlanta.

Vickers, Andrew 2008, *ABC Of complementary medicine*, Wiley-Blackwell, London.

Websites: Arthritis Research UK has an evidence-based report 'Complementary and alternative medicines for the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis, osteoarthritis and fibromyalgia' which classifies a wide range of treatments by

their effectiveness and safety available for download from

www.arthritisresearchuk.org

Institute of Registered Myotherapists of Australia www.myotherapy.org.au

The Australian Association of Massage Therapists www.aamt.com.au

The Australian Acupuncture and Chinese Medicine Association

www.acupuncture.org.au

The National Herbalists Association of Australia www.nhaa.org.au

Australian Naturopathic Practitioners Association www.anpa.asn.au

Australian Homeopathic Association www.homeopathyoz.org

National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (US)

www.nccam.nih.gov

© Copyright Arthritis Australia 2007. Reviewed January 2012. **Source:** A full list of the references used to compile this sheet is available from your local Arthritis Office. The Australian General Practice Network, Australian Physiotherapy Association, Australian Practice Nurses Association, Pharmaceutical Society of Australia and Royal Australian College of General Practitioners contributed to the development of this information sheet. The Australian Government has provided funding to support this project.

Your local Arthritis Office has information, education and support for people with arthritis

Freecall 1800 011 041 www.arthritisaustralia.com.au